

Counterterrorism Resilience: Expert Roundtables on Canadian National Security and Countering Violent Extremism

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TSAS RB 2023-07





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The Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society TSAS is supported as a national strategic initiative funded by SSHRC and Public Safety Canada, along with the following departments of the federal government:

- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- Canadian Security Intelligence Service
- Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada
- Correctional Services Canada
- Defence Research and Development Canada
- Global Affairs Canada
- Security Intelligence Review Committee
- Office of the Communications Security Establishment Commissioner

TSAS also receives financial support from several Canadian universities, including the University of Waterloo. Views expressed in this manuscript are those of the author(s) alone.

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SUMMARY

- Conducted expert roundtable discussions in fall 2022 focused on the intersecting themes of 1) extremism, violence and ideology: the complexity and evolution of Ideologically Motivated Extremism (IMVE) in Canada, 2) online tools: violent extremist and terrorist use of the internet, disinformation, and online platforms and 3) an evolving landscape: addressing violent extremism and countering terrorist threats in Canada.
- Discussions engaged with the importance of understanding the concepts of extremism, ideology, violence, threats, and online harms (among others), the profound complexity in how these are understood, and the impact on counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts online and offline.
- The roundtables underscored the value and richness of conversations between academics from across disciplines and individuals from various government departments and participants emphasized the need for more dialogue across sectors and stakeholders to increase collaboration and discussion of urgent and emerging issues and trends with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

METHODS

Our research team conducted a series of three virtual roundtables with the goal of discussing counterterrorism resilience and articulating a set of questions that address key issues and challenges of national security, counterterrorism and countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) in Canada (see Appendix A). The roundtable discussions focused on the intersecting themes of:

- Extremism, violence and ideology: the complexity and evolution of Ideologically Motivated Extremism (IMVE) in Canada
- Online tools: violent extremist and terrorist use of the internet, disinformation, and online platforms
- An evolving landscape: addressing violent extremism and countering terrorist threats in Canada

We hosted the roundtables in September and October 2022 online with nearly 40 participants from academic institutions across Canada and Canadian government agencies including Public Safety Canada, the Department of National Defence, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence.¹ We delivered three

¹ Additional government agencies were invited to participate but unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts. We sought to solicit a diversity of viewpoints within academia and government and the project's goal was to create space for discussion of key issues. Our research team applied GBA+ principles to our roundtable concept to include various insights and diverse participation to the extent we could. Due to the timeline of the project and University ethics restraints, we limited our classification of "expert" for this project to academics or practitioners affiliated with Canadian education institutions or granting agencies and public servants with portfolios in the research areas.

annotated bibliographies to participants, one in advance of each roundtable, to help frame the discussion and/or support further reading. The roundtables were held under Chatham House Rules and what follows is a summary of key takeaways (rather than points of consensus) from the discussions with research and policy challenge questions derived from the roundtables found in Appendix A.

THE COMPLEXITY AND EVOLUTION OF IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED EXTREMISM IN CANADA

Roundtable discussions engaged with how we understand and parse what we mean by “extremism”, as some individuals have real grievances without being extremists and not all extremists are violent. Violent and non-violent groups are ideologically similar groups, and this creates a messy space when dealing with the fine line between legitimate free speech and what is considered a threat. There is an important distinction between extremism and violent extremism and terrorism. IMVE broadens the standing of what constitutes a threat/risk in the Canadian context because there is overlap with some mainstream grievances and the normalization of conspiracy theories. IMVE is an elastic term that exists on a continuum, from very coherent and constructed ideologies to very incoherent ideologies with overlapping and personal beliefs.

Roundtable participants identified the struggle with defining ideology and the broader lack of recognition of its different levels of analysis including individual, group, and structure. Furthermore, understanding ideology is inherently political. This includes the distinction of where political dissent morphs into political ideology to spark terrorism and violent extremism and identifying when that threshold is crossed. This calls for a deeper understanding of ideological motivation to discern whether an attack is an isolated hate crime or the tip of a much bigger iceberg. For example, it is not just a matter of establishing where IMVE is bridged with hate, but it is also looking at larger categories of grievances tied into hate and violence. IMVE groups are learning and adapting quickly with strategic shifts and changing rhetoric depending on what is more socially acceptable. They are becoming very proficient at coalition building and leveraging local grievances with very distinct efforts to Canadianize narratives to make far right ideas more palatable to the public. When they tone down the rhetoric, they attract people who are less radical but then there is the possibility that the adherents organically change to become more radical. Strategic changes make it very difficult to pin down and understand ideologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as an accelerator to conspiratorial thinking and IMVE by weaponizing a crisis. It is not a passive force and people used it to raise their own ideological profiles. There has been a dramatic and quantifiable increase in the continuum of incidents from non-violent and non-criminal to violent and criminal behaviour from IMVE. Furthermore, there is a closer confluence between what people think and their propensity to engage in illegal, criminal behaviour. Misogyny continues to be a pillar of IMVE and roundtable participants emphasized that policing and government have been slow to confront the rising threat of gendered terrorism and the evolution of the Incel movement.

There is an intersection between IMVE and elected officials including 1) the propagation of polarizing rhetoric by officials which exacerbates pre-existing issues and 2) violent threats made against officials. With a widening of the Overton Window², formerly extreme views are now more mainstream, and thus the spectrum of reasonable speech has broadened. This too, presents problems when it comes to determining what can be classified as “extreme” speech or “extreme” content. The January 6, 2021 attack on the United States (US) Capitol was a watershed moment wherein the exercise of the rule of law for partisan reasons became mainstream. There is a shift in this space in how the rule of law should be applied to various people and movements which is problematic.

VIOLENT EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST USE OF THE INTERNET, DISINFORMATION, AND ONLINE PLATFORMS

Violence is often delineated through physical acts of harm, yet in the online space, violence can refer to psychological and emotional harm perpetuated through verbal abuse or hate speech. Furthermore, violence exists on a continuum which can start online and then move into real life. Yet defining online harm presents a challenge for policymakers as there was some discussion among participants about whether non-physical acts of violence should be classified in the same way as physical acts. Most agreed that violence is not only physical and that it can be present in other spaces.

The online space is an equalizer, and the size of the population does not matter for proliferation. Participants discussed how the argument can be made that the US is a bellwether for what is already happening in Canada and what is going to happen in Canada, but the level of influence can go both ways. Canada is as much an exporter of extremism as it is an importer, particularly when it comes to far-right actors and narratives. Moreover, Canada has acted as a bridge between the US and Europe and Canadians have been instrumental in translating and disseminating American content across the world, as was the case with QAnon. Increasingly, movements that appear localized have the potential to grow, spread and disseminate their messages globally so attention should be focused on smaller, grassroots extremist movements as well as larger, more established organizations.

Participants discussed the role of communications platforms in combatting IMVE online and highlighted content moderation on social media platforms as one of the largest and most critical challenges. Monitoring content and flagging potentially dangerous, extremist creators or posts is extremely difficult due to the multinational corporate nature of social media platforms and the sheer volume of content online. Some platforms also have little interest in cooperating with governments. While platforms do regulate content internally, often their policies are borne out of a lack of understanding about the impact that extremist and harmful content has. Content moderation and removal issues are impacted and confounded by how we understand extremism and ideology. The highly corporate, user-profit mentality of social media platforms means they

² The Overton Window is the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time.

are incentivized to maintain as many users as possible, and thus do not have a large degree of interest in regulating content. There would have to be a major cultural reset and a change of values at these corporations for real change to take place. Furthermore, there is complexity in the international intricacies of policies, responses and laws affecting global companies, platforms, users, communities, governments due to the global nature of online communities.

Content regulation itself can be viewed as a losing battle since content moves much faster than regulation. Terms of Service may be pro-active in authorizing automated moderation, but otherwise content moderation is reactive. Regulation also pushes extremist content and creators to fringe platforms which are even more difficult to regulate and monitor. Alternative platforms have a very difficult time getting off the ground, but there are bigger dangers when people find refuge in encrypted areas where proactivity is not possible. Furthermore, content regulation feeds into far-right extremist narratives that governments and platforms are trying to curb free-speech and overreach on civil liberties. Moderation and regulation present a philosophical problem because what is considered as “extreme” content will vary greatly depending on the beliefs and ideas of the person viewing it.

Early prevention is more useful (though more difficult) than content removal. Combatting IMVE online is a difficult and nuanced process and determining who to target in P/CVE efforts is complicated. People who post the most extreme, violent content online are not necessarily those who are most at risk of perpetuating violence in the real world. This means that algorithmic prediction is inaccurate at best. Finding a receptive audience for P/CVE efforts online is incredibly difficult and there is a limited understanding of how effective purely virtual P/CVE efforts are. It is debated whether the internet can be used as a tool for facilitating disengagement. Academics and practitioners are exploring new techniques, like inoculation theory, which might offer some in-roads for conducting such efforts online. Online user experiences are also being explored. This goes beyond the “how” of P/CVE targeting and looks at the “when” and “where” to better understand if there is a moment in a person’s internet journey when they can be best reached to prevent radicalization.

ADDRESSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND COUNTERING TERRORIST THREATS IN CANADA

Violent extremist and terrorist threats are part of a broader threat landscape in Canada. While it is necessary to distinguish between objectionable, illegal, and criminal violent extremist actions, the incursion of extremism into the mainstream and the interconnectedness and internationalism of the online space adds great complexity. Participants discussed Canadian laws, the definition of terrorism, national security frameworks, and law enforcement tools and whether they can accurately capture new forms of violent extremist threats. Some considered how our current laws and definition of terrorism can capture the threat of IMVE in Canada but suggested that law enforcement and those investigating criminal activity need to understand that and think of it that way with a deeper understanding of ideology. Participants contextualized that Canada is working with an outdated national security framework that is not situated in current

era threats. Updating the national security apparatus in a way that does not infringe upon our rights is a complex consideration.

Recent developments in the international threat landscape have also brought academics and practitioners to question the place of counterterrorism in a context of great power competition and to assess the link between misinformation/disinformation/malinformation (MDM), foreign influences and violent extremism. The new reality is of willful interference in society by highly organized government agents with the objective of creating chaos. This is conventionally classified as a traditional security issue and aligns with other state activities “not meeting the threshold of conflict” more than a CVE issue, but these are now blending. There are new segments of the population who are drawn to extremist movements who do not fit readily into traditional concepts of extremist ideology. This is converging with a reinforcing factor of hostile activities by state actors (HASA) with the internet acting as an accelerator. A traditional view of terrorism and violent extremism is that they are something brought to Canada from external sources, but those norms have shifted significantly.

The intent of influence operations is not new, but the scale and intensity have magnified the effect. Misinformation is turning into direct manipulation with a weaponization of echo chambers and a whole-of-society approach is needed to confront MDM and its effects. Roundtable participants discussed how tackling HASA and MDM and preventing violent extremism should not be understood as two mutually exclusive tasks. With growing erosion of public trust in Canadian institutions, the media and politicians, foreign agents only need to capitalize on the existing disinformation and misinformation campaigns put out by domestic actors which are much more proactive than they were before. This poses problems of enormous complexity with no clean sense of how it is all converging. These issues can no longer be dealt with in isolation and preventing one thus implies preventing the other.

Distinguishing between legitimate free speech and a threat has implications for P/CVE efforts. When does one cross the line? Where do you apply prevention measures and how are those people reached? It is not about who the people are, but more about how you reach them. How do we channel peoples’ grievances and problems and how do we measure what works? This is very personal to each individual and roundtable participants emphasized that there is not enough research on this. We have yet to establish what the motivation behind extremism is and there are long held notions that there is something “wrong” with those who engage in extremism, but this exists on a large continuum. Participants emphasized that in facing these threats it is not something we can legislate away and there is the unintended consequence of hardening the resolve of individuals and groups.

Blanket strategies reinforce certain dangerous ideas. Communities have been stigmatized in various ways and the impact counterterrorism on communities is profound. There is a shift in the P/CVE space moving away from catching “terrorists”, criminalizing people/communities, and increased fear between stigmatized communities and law enforcement and government authorities. We see a shift now more on holistic approaches, focused more on education,

building trust, rehabilitation and reintegrating and psychological support. There are recurring prevention themes as individuals from across the left and right seek a sense of meaning, of belonging, of purpose and positivity, and there is a sense of pessimism within their personal outlook. Roundtable participants underscored the value of work being done and essential funding needed in the P/CVE space to continue to confront the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism. Prevention and intervention require a systematic approach based on information sharing between actors (including federal, provincial, and territorial relationships) and multidisciplinary teams. Support, guidance, and resources are needed for organizations to continue the P/CVE work they are doing, and participants called for additional involvement at the provincial and municipal levels.

NEXT STEPS

These roundtables underscore the value and richness of conversations between academics from across disciplines and individuals from various government departments. Participants emphasized the need for more dialogue and conversation between academics, within the public service across federal, provincial, and territorial ministries, as well as municipal levels and various stakeholders (community organizations, victims of terrorism, practitioners, NGOs, industry, tech companies and social media platforms) to increase collaboration and discussion of urgent and emerging issues and trends with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. It was beyond the scope of this project to include consultations with a broader group of stakeholders and additional research and avenues for discussions are encouraged by the quality and productivity of the sessions and from participant feedback of their value.

There are major issues of public trust in institutions and now more than ever, Canada needs to engage more widely with the public, on the terms of the public, and efforts need to be concentrated on rebuilding trust. The Director of CSIS [has often said](#) “keeping Canada safe requires a national-security literate population”. Participants emphasized the importance of making research and findings accessible to the public. Discussion focused on the need for government to be more agile in marketing and communicating to further efforts to improve transparency with the public on security issues and foster the trust. A challenge of communicating research with the public is that trusted, accessible sources are scarce and those that exist require steady funding. Participants emphasized the need for a knowledge accumulation and translation campaign to organize and integrate what we know. A more strategic, systematic approach is needed for this with third party distribution to attract interest and use the material in an effective way.

Participants from government agencies provided feedback for academic research to be made more accessible to policy and practitioners with actionable targets, answering questions of specific interest to policy makers, and some focus on the regional level and feedback on local issues. Academics have more freedom in research and feedback encouraged these experts to tackle pointed issues. Participants were encouraged by the promising work and dedication of

students in the field; however, they stressed the need for more students to work in this space and the need for facilitated outreach and mentors. Feedback from academics included requests that government provide more strategic and targeted insights about what kinds of research is needed for actionable policy and provide access to more real time data needed for targeted academic work. Each group also needs to be more realistic about what they can individually achieve, and collaboration was encouraged where possible to better mitigate the risks emerging offline and online. Participants underscored the need to band together in a much more efficient and productive way.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH AND POLICY CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

The research team encouraged roundtable participants to share and discuss questions framing this policy and research space. Challenge questions are consolidated below and grouped by roundtable theme:

Extremism, Violence and Ideology: The Complexity and Evolution of Ideologically Motivated Extremism in Canada

- Can ideology be personal? Does it need to be tied to a group? How can the coherency at the individual level be assessed – by the individual themselves or as a set of beliefs?
- In understanding ideology, how can we understand what is *not* ideology?
- How can the approach to ideology appreciate the different levels of analysis and the strategic, organic changes based on group demographics and dynamics?
- At what point does one cross the threshold between ideologically motivated criminal activity or hate crimes and ideologically motivated terrorism? Or political dissent with legitimate grievances into a political ideology and threats to public safety?
- Can we look at the effects of an IMVE attack to deduce a definitional framework?
- How does IMVE benefit from and capitalize on waves of popularity and what are the implications of how this can overlap with mainstream grievances?
- How can populism be included as part of the political response in work on IMVE, (specifically conspiracy and far right extremism), especially in terms of the rise in threats against elected officials and government representatives?



- How do we deal with something that is not defined, like “extremism”?
- If IMVE is different from terrorism, how do we define and engage with the distinctions?
- Do we see any attempts from the Canadian IMVE movements to deliberately present as amorphous? What constitutes the ideologies of elements contained therein?

Online Tools: Violent Extremist and Terrorist Use of the Internet, Disinformation and Online Platforms

- Where are the boundaries for what we understand as violence? Can the definition be expanded and broken down into types of harm, e.g., physical, psychological, and emotional harm?
- How should online harm be defined in relation to violence from a policy perspective?
- How can platforms and governments be more proactive with identifying trajectories to violence?
- What is the best way to implement and enforce regulation online?
- How useful is content moderation and de-platforming for reducing extremism online?
- How much responsibility should platforms have when it comes to targeting extremism online?
- How can governments collaborate with platforms that have no interest in collaborating?
- How has the widening of the Overton Window impacted online extremism?
- In relation to the online space, how should CVE practitioners decide who to target for CVE efforts when those who are most influential online are not likely those who are most extreme?
- How can governments, practitioners and platforms communicate and coordinate their efforts better (including internationally)?
- How do we understand Canada’s role in the proliferation and consumption of online extremist content and its role in countering online extremism in a global context?



An Evolving Landscape: Addressing Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorist Threats in Canada

- How do we understand the interplay between terrorism and violent extremism and the convergence of security threats Canada is facing, including threats to elections and democracy, misinformation and disinformation, conspiracy theories, and threats presented by foreign conflicts on Canadian society?
- How do we define threats to democracy? Broadly? Or where are the boundaries to this threat and the involvement of state actors in terrorism and violent extremism?
- How do we measure and replicate effectiveness in programming and initiatives countering terrorism and violent extremism? How can we measure success?
- Threats to democracy are not new. What within the current system is making beliefs more appealing?
- How can various federal government departments be more involved in supporting the internal efforts of Public Safety, social organizations, and provincial/local governments in addressing terrorism and violent extremism in Canada?
- How does Canada work with its allies when threat perception perhaps differs and when threats are transnational? What role can international partnerships play in the P/CVE space?
- How do we define violence and what harm is, especially when addressing free speech?
- What space should public communication take in P/CVE? How much should we communicate with the public on issues related to violent extremism, how and for what reasons?
- How is trust created within the public? How do people understand what an authority is, how do they listen to authority figures, and how do they understand a figurehead?
- What is the role of the state and what can it do in distinguishing between objectionable, legal, and criminal activities?
- Are there creative ways to think about the traditional counter-terrorism space, especially in terms of online threats?
- In response to external influence actors, how can defence, intelligence, and foreign affairs galvanize efforts, including in the view of international partnerships, in support of the



internal efforts of Heritage, Public Safety, social organizations, and provincial/local governments in addressing violent extremism in Canada?

- How do you foster empowerment, resiliency, and critical thinking within adult populations?
- How can new institutional frameworks engage in campaigns of knowledge accumulations? What would such a systematic approach of knowledge translation look like?

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Funding Acknowledgement:

The roundtables and the work of this research team was funded by the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society (TSAS).

Acknowledgements:



We would like to thank all the individuals who took the time to attend and contribute to the roundtable discussions. Thank you for sharing your insights with the research team. We appreciate your time, expertise, and commitment to preventing/countering terrorism and violent extremism in research, policy, and practice.

Keywords:

Terrorism; Violent Extremism; National Security; Online

Suggested Highlights:

- Hosted three virtual roundtables in September and October 2022 with nearly 40 participants from academic institutions across Canada and Canadian government agencies in three thematic and overlapping sessions: 1) extremism, violence and ideology: the complexity and evolution of Ideologically Motivated Extremism (IMVE) in Canada, 2) online tools: violent extremist and terrorist use of the internet, disinformation, and online platforms and 3) an evolving landscape: addressing violent extremism and countering terrorist threats in Canada.
- The research team encouraged roundtable participants to share and discuss questions framing this policy and research space and created an Appendix of 35 research and policy challenge questions addressing IMVE, the online space, the threat landscape, and a myriad of intersection points.
- Individuals from various government departments and participants emphasized the need for more dialogue across sectors and stakeholders to increase collaboration and discussion of urgent and emerging issues and trends with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.